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HEADLINE: Closing the digital divide - Programs seek to improve computer access for all

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BODY:

The technological revolution of the last decade has injected a horde of catchy phrases into our language - terms such as "FAQ," "snail mail" and "alpha geek."

The most descriptive - and least understood - may be "digital divide."

As shorthand to describe the gap between technology haves and have-nots, the term pops up frequently on the lips of politicians and talking heads. As in: "We must close the digital divide."

But an examination of the real digital divide shows the gap can't be closed by computer access alone - minds and attitudes matter more than machines.

Studies show that disparities in computer ownership and Internet access follow income, race, age and geographic lines. But those figures are misleading simply because they are changing rapidly. Increasingly, low-income families, the elderly and rural Americans are merging onto the information superhighway.

Courtesy of the economic downturn, information-technology training is no longer a sure-fire path to a hefty income. Yet without basic computer training, job seekers are doomed to the "Do you want fries with that?" track.

Boston-area educators who are working to close the digital divide say it will take more than getting a computer into every home or computer training into every classroom. The key, they believe, is to make the computer a life-enhancing tool, instead of an interesting diversion.

Boston has a variety of programs - in public schools, community centers and colleges - designed to increase technical literacy. But "You can't allow a computer in a household where only the children know how to use them," said Edward DeMore, CEO of the Boston Digital Bridge Foundation, a private, nonprofit group that organizes partnerships between corporations and community programs.

Thus, the Digital Bridge Foundation helped launch the comprehensive Technology Goes Home project, designed for families (see accompanying story), as well as TechBoston, which targets Boston schools.

Tomorrow, the foundation holds an "Evening on the Bridge" benefit in Franklin Park to bring together corporate sponsors and TGH families. Imark Communications is sponsoring the event, which was rescheduled after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

But relying on high-tech angels for digital divide solutions has its pitfalls. A year ago, dot-coms were clamoring to link themselves with community groups. California-based NorthPoint Communications, for example, promised free high-speed access to the Mission Main public housing development in Mission Hill. NorthPoint never provided the access - although its Web site boasted about it - and the company eventually went bust, sending Mission Main scrambling for an ISP.

Community organizers who once urged activists to "get yourself a dot-com," now ruefully conceded the "dot-com done gone."

But even without dot-com charity, computer literacy is growing. In 1998-1999, TechBoston provided computer training for 100 Boston public school students; last year 1,500 students received training.

TechBoston students included Joel Lamousnery, now 18, who not only built his own computer but went on to pass all six Microsoft certification tests, an impressive achievement even for an adult. More importantly, Lamousnery became a successful role model for younger students. "There's no other model more powerful than that," said Mary Skipper, TechBoston director.

If Boston schools are training the kids, community centers are training the parents. IT training - from basic to sophisticated - is available at sites such as the Codman Square Health Center in Dorchester. Codman runs a comprehensive technology center, with multiple classrooms, a student-run cybershop and facilities for teaching multimedia, Webcasting and computer repair.

Mission Main also holds computer classes geared for low-income households. Computer expert and teacher Royal Bolling Jr. said this does not mean dumbing down the curriculum; it means relating classes to students' life experience. For example, he organized computer classes for former Bradlees employees, left jobless when the retailer closed. Job skills are just as important as computer skills, he told them. "You are smarter than this piece of plastic," he said. "You control it. It does not control you."

The current economic woes have not ended the need for training, although job categories have changed. For example, Web page developers are less in demand than database managers, Bolling said.

Kenneth Granderson, CEO of Inner-City Software of Dorchester, said closing the digital gap should go beyond targeting low-income families to helping minorities in advanced technology projects.

Young people should realize "you don't have to consider only opportunities at the bottom of the food chain, you can be at the head of the pack," said Granderson, an MIT graduate, whose company's name proudly affirms its software projects "came from the 'hood.'" Blacks should be creating their own Web content, he said.

Likewise, Mike Green, who teaches TGH classes at the Wentworth Institute of Technology, hopes to help build local intra-nets in which "content is created and controlled by the people in that neighborhood."

Ultimately, the digital divide reflects society's overall economic and racial disparities, and "we have not done a very good job curing any of this," DeMore said.

Still, Granderson said, the Internet represents "the closest to a level playing field that we're likely to see in a few generations."

Log on for help

Resources:

- The Digital Bridge Foundation: www.digitalboston.org
- Technology Goes Home: www.tghboston.org
- TechBoston: www.techboston.org
- Imark Communications: www.eotb.imark-corp.com
- Inner-City Software: www.innercity.com